



Charter Schools Institute

State University of New York

Harbor Science & Arts Charter School

Report

2001-2002
Academic Year

History and Purpose

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of local school districts and are created by civic leaders, community groups, educators and parents interested in creating public school choice in their communities, particularly for children at-risk of academic failure.

Like all public schools, charter schools are open to all children, non-sectarian in their programs and funded with public tax dollars. Each public charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees that, like all school boards, is subject to New York State's Freedom of Information and Open Meetings laws. Public charter schools authorized by the State University of New York Trustees are subject to oversight and monitoring by the University's Charter Schools Institute. Additionally, all public charter schools in New York State are subject to inspection and oversight by the state Department of Education.

In exchange for freedom from many state rules and regulations, each public charter school receives a charter, or contract, of up to five years and must meet stated student performance goals or risk losing its charter and ceasing operations. This tradeoff – freedom from rules and regulations in exchange for unprecedented accountability for student performance – is considered one of the most significant differences between public charter schools and other public schools run by school districts.

The specific purposes of the charter schools law are set forth in Education Law §2850(2)(a-f), and they include improving student learning and achievement, increasing learning opportunities for all students (particularly those at-risk of academic failure), expanding parental choice in public schools and moving from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.

The New York Charter Schools Act empowers the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York, the New York State Board of Regents, or local boards of education (in conjunction with the Regents) to authorize new public charter schools. Additionally, existing public schools can seek charter status through their governing boards of education, again in conjunction with the Regents.

The Charter Schools Institute was established by the University Trustees to assist in the review, approval and oversight of schools seeking their charter via the Trustees. Inspections, analysis and reporting of information represent one facet of the oversight process conducted and managed by the Institute.

The Institute has implemented a periodic visitation and inspection process for charter schools authorized by the University Trustees. The Institute conducts multiple site visits and inspection visits throughout the five years of an approved charter; some visits are announced and others are not. This process allows the Institute to gather regular information regarding teaching and learning within the environment of each school, as well as information regarding each school's administrative operations.

This report reflects the observations and findings from an inspection visit conducted by a 2 – 4 member team comprising Institute staff, and, in some cases, outside experts. Visiting inspectors seek evidence of effectiveness in key areas: teaching and learning (curriculum, instruction and assessment); climate (environment and discipline); facility (building or physical plant); and, fidelity to the school’s charter, including its mission. Although issues regarding compliance with state and federal laws and regulations may be noted (and subsequently addressed), compliance is not the ultimate purpose of the inspection visit.

The inspection visit included meeting with the principal/director, classroom visitations, ad hoc meetings/conversations with staff and students and a review of student work. Data from this inspection along with anecdotal evidence from visitations during the school year was used to develop the curriculum and instruction component of the public report. Institute staff considered the following elements of successful schools in preparing the report:

- Do the school’s practices reflect high expectations for student achievement?
- How do teachers assess student work?
- Does student work reflect rigorous assessment?
- Do students appear to be engaged and attentive?
- What is the level of teacher professionalism and expertise?
- Assess the school climate and learning environment.
- Is the school orderly?
- Do the physical facilities support effective instruction?
- Is the school true to its purpose as stated in its mission and charter?
- Assess the school’s direction, leadership and growth.

This document is designed to share the inspectors’ observations, findings and discussion with the school’s governing board, parents and the public. It is also designed to provide substantive information that can be used to improve the school’s educational programs for students as well as inform parents and other members of the public about the school’s progress.

Readers should keep in mind that charter schools face major challenges, and that schools address them at different rates. There is no one correct time frame for successfully meeting each challenge, so long as each school is prepared to make a persuasive case for renewal at the end of its 5-year charter. The challenges are identical to those of a start-up business enterprise, except public charter schools involve parents and children in the high-profile world of public education. Challenges commonly addressed by public charter schools across the country and in New York State include:

- Establishing a positive school culture that provides high expectations, support and encouragement for students and teaching staff, any necessary remediation for students, and consistent daily routines for all;
- Establishing operational and communication patterns with the governing board, as well as communication patterns with staff, parents and the community;
- Setting up sound fiscal processes and procedures;
- Establishing this operation in often less-than-ideal facilities, without ready access to facilities funding mechanisms available to other public schools;

- Creating an environment where teachers receive timely professional development to address changing student needs;
- Ensuring that all staff are familiar with and consistently use the school-wide system for behavior management; and;
- Retaining qualified staff and minimizing the frequency and rate of any staff turnover by understanding the reason for it, and providing replacement staff with an orientation to the school and its program, as well as the necessary professional development.

School Description

The Harbor Science and Arts Charter School, approved by the State University Board of Trustees in January 2000 and by the Board of Regents in April, opened in September of that year in East Harlem. For the 2001-2002 school year it enrolled 155 in grades K-7. By the end of its 5-year charter, the school will enroll 196 students in grades 1-8.

The Harbor Science and Arts Charter School emphasizes science and technology while integrating them with the arts to provide a well-rounded education. Students work with adult science partners to explore how nature works, and then share their findings with others through student run workshops, conferences, international telecommunications conventions and publications. The school makes use of many community resources including the Harlem Meer studies with Central Park Conservancy, the Biodiversity Project with the American Museum of Natural History, The Urban Woodlands Project sponsored by The City Parks Foundation and the support services of the multi-service youth agency Boys and Girls Harbor.

According to the 2002 Annual District Report of the New York City Board of Education, for the 2000-2001 school year Community School District 4 enrolled contained 13,543 students: 35% African-American; 60.9% Hispanic; 1.6% white; and, 2.5% American Indian, Alaskan, Asian and Pacific Islander. Additionally, 88.8% of students in the district were eligible for free lunch under the Federal School Lunch Program, a common indicator of poverty.

In 2001, 68.7% of students in Community School District 4 did not meet state standards on the 4th grade English Language Arts test; 56.7% of the students did not meet state standards on the 4th grade Math test. On the 8th grade English Language Arts test, 71.7% of students did not meet state standards; 86.4% of the students did not meet state standards on the 8th grade Math test.

Discussion of Findings

Inspection Team

On April 29, 2002, an end of year inspection team for the Charter Schools Institute visited Harbor Science and Arts Charter School. The team comprised:

- Radi Clytus, Senior Analyst, CSI
- Ivan Hageman, Principal, East Harlem School

Academic Data

The Harbor Charter School for Science and Math's annual Progress Report contains information on 2001-02 student achievement, based on the academic goals the school set for itself in its Accountability Plan. The two major goals are in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. In the Progress Report, Harbor provides data to show that it is far from meeting its fourth-grade student achievement objectives in ELA and math. Since it is changing its standardized testing program, it was too early to determine if it was meeting its ELA and math objectives of enabling students to make substantial yearly progress. With these data, Harbor has begun to present the evidence, which will build its case for charter renewal in its fifth year of operation.

School Curriculum and Instructional Practice

In its charter, Harbor Science and Arts Charter School commits to creating an environment "where students and adults work cooperatively on 'real-world' problems." The school's academic program is "performance and exhibition-based" and designed to "challenge students of all ability levels of learning" and promote "a keen awareness of cultural heritage". Such an approach was evident, to varying degrees of effectiveness, during informal visits and formal inspections throughout the 2001-02 school year. Additionally, the posted results of science projects and the presentation of student work which adorned the school's hallways and classroom walls, revealed the school's emphasis on working with its science research partners (Central Park Conservancy, Teachers College at Columbia University, City College) to enhance interdisciplinary instruction.

The effectiveness of Harbor Science and Arts' academic program was most apparent in some lower grade classrooms. Teachers in the strongest classes used focused lesson plans and led students to create work that demonstrated mastery of specific skills and knowledge in literacy and science. For example, in one first-grade class where students were observing silk worms, the teacher ensured that the exercise was orderly and focused throughout. She first provided the class with booklets in which to structure their daily observations. She informed them of what to look for, how to pose questions, and how properly to record their answers. Subsequently, she was able to effectively monitor the progress of each student.

Further, there was significant evidence of vetted and graded student writing, particularly in journals. These documents contained erasures and corrections that indicated student progression towards the production of a final project. In several student journals, the development of complex sentence structure was evident over the course of the year due to the regular use and maintenance of these materials by both students and teachers. Teachers in such classrooms also were able to produce credible evidence of student work that reflected an understanding of learning standards. However, such effective assessment strategies were the exception in the school.

Student work and teacher performance in other classrooms, particularly in the upper grades, did not effectively mirror the mission and targeted goals of the school's charter. Classroom

observations revealed inconsistencies regarding teacher implementation of lessons and their objectives. Teachers had difficulty making the connection between the knowledge and skills they intended to teach and student mastery of them. For instance, during an exercise where students were instructed to use three-dimensional shapes to build a bridge, they were unable to identify shapes or define key terms with which they were working, such as “polygon.”

The presence of poorly organized portfolios (e.g., collections of work sheets in varying stages of completion, partially-edited and unedited compositions, and few teacher comments) suggested an apparent lack of standards for the monitoring and assessment of student work and an unclear purpose for the use of portfolios school-wide. Significantly, such criteria as rubrics or checklists for assessing student work were not always in evidence. Although the report card design that school leaders shared with inspectors was a good example of measuring student work, it remained unclear as to how teachers actually made judgments about individual student progress. While the principal described a policy of grading students based upon their mastery of skills and knowledge, several teachers interviewed described their practice of grading students based on improvement, which inspectors note are fundamentally different criteria.

The school uses team teaching (where a fully licensed teacher partners with another teacher or teaching assistant to provide instruction) in all classrooms. Effective cooperation and collaboration of teacher teams varied. In one first grade class, teachers consistently planned concurrent and often complementary lessons that divided the class into small groups. Teachers were able to plan each lesson so that individual student needs were met and instructional time was maximized. While in one combined third/fourth grade class, the lead teacher was unaware of the small group activities being facilitated by a paraprofessional teacher in the same classroom.

School Climate

While the school’s design calls for rich interdisciplinary instruction and hands-on activities, and while many teachers attempted to use such strategies, inspectors were concerned that students did not appear to be taking full advantage of these design elements because of a general lack of clarity and consistency in classroom structures and behavioral expectations.

Institute staff observed in some classrooms students who were excited and on task when they were engaged with a structured and well-designed project in an atmosphere where expectations for student behavior and work product were clear. However, many lessons observed were not well designed, structured or presented in an atmosphere of clear expectations resulting in a general lack of student engagement and, in some instances, misconduct. As a result, few classrooms taught or reinforced the habits and routines necessary to build the sort of behavioral climate where project-based learning could occur.

Institute staff observed a wide range of expectations for student order and discipline. Some classrooms lacked efficiency and purpose. Valuable lesson time was often lost to extended negotiations about behavior and repeated requests for such simple activities as lining up to leave the classroom. Similarly, transitions between activities or between areas of the building were inefficient and diminished the amount of instructional time. Student misconduct and unchecked

enthusiasm often impeded the efficiency of several classrooms, and this too took away valuable lesson time. The latter concerns were more prevalent in the upper grades.

Facility

Harbor Science and Art's classrooms are well stocked and their physical arrangements allow for small group and project-based activities. The school uses other spaces and learning to promote self-directed learning and a range of instruction. For example, several well-presented displays highlighted student projects around the school. Students appeared comfortable in their surroundings and commented to inspectors that they enjoyed the fact that they used the Central Park as part of their lab sessions.

The school tended to be clean and orderly. However, some faculty areas and classrooms were slightly more cluttered in appearance than others. Piles of paper, folders and supplies were not organized and suggested a lack of did not set a tone of responsibility and attentiveness to organization. The best lessons tended to occur in clutter-free and organized classroom spaces.

School Mission and Charter Implementation

At the end of its second year, Harbor Science and Art Charter School continued to address many of the challenges customarily found in first year schools. Although Institute staff did see positive examples of students engaged in "real-world" problems, using technology, and challenging their own abilities, Institute staff did not see evidence of this being a school-wide culture.

The administration has identified a critical issue, which it believes has contributed to the inconsistencies in the school's academic program, namely, the school has not been able to develop a core staff of teachers who understand the school's mission and can put the design in place effectively. More specifically, in a conversation with Institute staff, the school director noted: "We're brand new again this year," and "Nobody walks in the door ready to teach how we want." This said, the administration is not inviting back at least three teachers, whom it regards as "not quite right for them."

Similarly, the school's administration described an intention to establish a clear link between standards, student work and assessment. Teachers' comments to inspectors and practices observed in classrooms did not always reflect the administration's commitment to such links. The school also has been slow to finalize its accountability plan; without the data on student performance, and a clear delineation of its assessment and accountability practices, the school may not put itself in a strong position to present a compelling case for renewal. If the school is to rely upon teacher designed assessments, supported by anecdotal reports and portfolios that document the anecdotal reports, it must do a better job of training staff in the construction and maintenance of such tools. Moreover, the link between standards and teachers' daily lessons and objectives also warrant greater clarity and facility.